I am a citizen of the Miami Nation of Indiana and much of my scholarly and professional work is directly tied to my work in Miami language, culture, and corn revitalization. I have degrees in Landscape Architecture and a Ph.D. in American Studies with a focus upon American Indian Studies and Museum Studies, making my work and interests very interdisciplinary. A few of my interests that relate specifically to this discussion on sustainability are colonialism/imperialism, Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous agriculture tied to my work with the Science Museum’s Ethnobotany Collection of Indigenous heirloom seeds.

What I know:

I bring to this conversation my own perspectives that draw upon my past scholarly work and my work with Native communities, namely the Miami Nation and the broader movement of Indigenous food sovereignty. I would like to contribute to (a) broadening the discussion of “sustainability” and “resiliency” and (b) recognizing the historical legacy of colonialism and its relationship to contemporary issues facing Indigenous communities regarding sustainability, especially in the area of food sovereignty and the reclamation of Indigenous seed varieties.

What I want to know:

My questions for this conference are how can we address the legacy of settler colonialism while also addressing issues of sustainability? How can Indigenous histories like the Miami Nation inform how sustainability proceeds so as to not perpetuate colonial practices? In other words, how can sustainability and decolonization work in conjunction with one another? How can there be balance, respect, and reciprocity between Indigenous and settler societies as we envision an inclusive and sustainable future for humans and the earth? Finally, how can the idea of dormancy contribute to discussions on resiliency, collapse, decline, and extinction?

Current research:

My recent dissertation on Miami history and involvement within my own community and work within the broader regional Indigenous food sovereignty movement informs how I am approaching this discussion. As other Indigenous scholars have pointed out when dealing with non-Indigenous terms and concepts like sustainability or sovereignty, it is necessary for us as Indigenous peoples to either reject or redefine these terms from within our own perspectives and that these perspectives are not only a powerful way to transform our own communities, but to transform our relationships with the surrounding settler society. I offer my own interpretation of Miami oral tradition as a philosophy on living in balance that is not only a reflection upon the Miami past and current realities but also provides an Indigenous perspective for our collective human future.

The Miami people believe that we originate from a place called Saakiweeyonki, the confluence of the St. Joseph’s River and Lake Michigan in what is now southwestern Michigan. Our origin story tells us pulling ourselves into existence from a deluge, with the people telling one another “saakaahkweelo” (grab hold of the tree limbs). While this is
the people telling one another “saakaahkweelo” (grab ahold of the tree limbs). While this is a story about the Miami past, it also embodies an important Miami concept - nahi-mihitoheeseniaki, which means to be ‘proper human beings.’ This is a philosophy of living that it is about walking a path of balance with all of creation that is founded upon mutual respect and reciprocity. Miami cosmology provides a further perspective of seeing the world as a dual division in all of creation between earth and sky, male and female, etc.

Within each of these divisions is also an element of the other. For example the earth and the sky balance one another. The thunder beings control the sky and underwater panther controls the earth and waters. These beings are constantly in conflict with one another and so balance is ironically maintained through imbalance and conflict.

I believe this philosophy is the result of accumulated knowledge over millennia from observation and spiritual relationships. Throughout our history, we have never always been in balance; this could be true of pre-contact and as well as post-contact events. Several of these moments are retained in the stories of our culture hero Wihsakacaakwa where we are reminded that imbalance occurs as the result of disrespect and the lack of reciprocity. This philosophy of living has been extremely difficult to uphold in the face of settler colonialism that has resulted in the fragmentation of our lands, our people and forms of knowledge that are dependent upon the relationships of the people to the land. The Miami people are currently working to pull ourselves out from the deluge of settler colonialism that has been a long and hard process of reassembling the fragments of our relationships to our lands, ourselves and knowledge into something grounded in the past but also very much addressing present issues and looking to the future. This work is incredibly difficult since the current of colonialism is still very much present in our community.

Removal played an integral role in fragmentation. Removal goes far beyond the Federal Indian policy of the 1830s that physically removed tribes from their homelands to lands west of the Mississippi. Miami people have undergone a series of physical removals that has left a lasting and painful legacy in our community. In 1838, the Miami National Reserve, an area of 1,600 square miles, was ceded to the United States with the premise that the entire Nation would be removed in the near future (1846), but around half of the population of 600 Miami avoided removal through Congressional and treaty exemptions and remained on fee simple or individually held trust lands in Indiana. Shortly after the Miami ceded this vast stretch of land once dominated by vast wetlands, tall grass prairies and hardwood forests, the wetlands were drained, the prairies tilled under and the forests were felled for agriculture and lumber to feed the growing populations far beyond the Miami homeland. The other half of the Miami Nation was removed to Kansas Territory. The Miami reservation there was greatly reduced in 1854 and allotted to individuals. In 1867, the Miami in Kansas were given a choice of remaining in Kansas by denouncing their tribal citizenship and accepting their allotment in fee simple or moving again to Indian Territory. Most who remained in Kansas quickly lost their allotments and became landless with some moving back to Indiana to live on the dwindling tribal land base there. Those who remained in Indiana encountered an unending onslaught on tribal sovereignty by the State of Indiana that eventually led to the Bureau of Indian Affairs illegally revoking their tribal status in 1897; ending the trust status of tribal lands and leaving the community virtually landless by the 1930s and forced to work as migrant farmhands, circus hands, and other forms of labor on their former reserve lands.

The second removal of the Miami from Kansas coincided with vast deposits of coal recently discovered under the Miami reservation in Kansas. Not long after removal to Indian Territory, the reservation there was quickly allotted and lead was discovered under the nearby Quapaw Reservation. The Quapaw and Miami were quickly defrauded of their allotments and mineral rights, became landless, and many were faced with the only choice of working in the lead mines. The mining process created a toxic environment that continues today and is known as the Tar Creek Superfund site, the largest in the United States. While the majority of the devastation from this mining is upon Quapaw lands, much of the land and waters within the former boundaries of the Miami reservation has varying
degrees of lead contamination.

Through this colonial process, the Miami people have been physically removed numerous times and often left with no other choice than to literally mine the resources upon these lands no longer in their control. The resources and profits from them are further removed from the Miami people who are left to deal with the environmental, economic, social, and cultural destruction left it its wake.

These are just some examples from Miami history where the legacy of settler colonialism continues to shape the contemporary realities of just one Native community and the incredible obstacles we face if we are to even think about sustainability. This legacy continues to challenge us as we work to try to become nahi-mihtohseeniaki once again.

Finally my work with Indigenous heirloom seeds illustrates the legacy of fragmentation and the challenges of Native peoples as we work to reassemble the parts of ourselves that have been scattered as a result of settler colonialism. In the past few years, I have been witness to a growing and strong food sovereignty movement within Indigenous communities in the U.S. At the core of this is the right to grow “culturally appropriate” foods to sustain Native communities. Many Native communities are actively creating community gardens and reasserting their food traditions and there is an incredible need among Native communities for the heirloom seeds like those in the Science Museum’s collections.

These seeds are one of the essential ingredients to being sustainable when it comes to food and are the product of careful selection over hundreds, even thousands of years where they were selected to be suitable and successful over a vast region of the Western hemisphere under extremely different environmental conditions. The numerous varieties of corn have more “output” in terms of nutrition and require less “input” in terms of water, fertilizer and pesticides. For the many Indigenous peoples of this hemisphere, corn is a gift from benevolent spiritual beings and is treated with the utmost respect and often as a living being. The seeds themselves have been fragmented and scattered to repositories far beyond their community of origin.

One of the central ideas that I have come to learn from working with these seeds is around the idea of dormancy. From a Miami perspective, seeds are in the state between death and birth, they are the end product of a plant’s life, but also hold the potential for rebirth. Domesticated crops like corn, beans, and squash cannot grow or produce seed again without the help of humans and we as humans need the seeds to sustain ourselves; we both need one another. If we respect the seeds by planting them and caring for them, they in turn will provide for us. This is similar to what I’ve experienced with the revitalization of the Miami language which we say was dormant (not extinct) for the thirty years after our last speaker died in the 1960s until we began a language revitalization movement in the 1990s. Our language cannot survive on its own; it needs a community to take care of it. Within the seeds and within the language is dormant knowledge, and reciprocity is central to the reawakening of these and the people.

References:


